Jack Kent

ARTIA

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

with photographs of puppets by

JIŘÍ TRNKA

retold for children by

Eduard Petiška

Who is this leaning from her rose-bowered window in the first rays of the early morning sun? And who is that below, reaching up towards the window with his arm? Fairy story-teller, tell us the tale. Please tell us all you know. We will listen very quietly, just listen and watch . . .

Many long, long years ago there was a house in Athens, and in it lived fair Hermia. But of what use to her was all her beauty if she was not happy? Everywhere she went, she was closely guarded by her father, stern Egeus. It was only in the early hours of the morning, while her father still slept, that she could safely hasten to the window, beneath which her beloved Lysander would be waiting from the break of dawn for the moment when he could cast his eyes on his beloved Hermia. But as soon as the sun roused Egeus from his sleep, Hermia would have to bid Lysander farewell. Egeus disliked Lysander. He would chase him away angrily when he serenaded Hermia from beneath the window. And indeed he had reason to be angry, for he had chosen a different bridegroom for his daughter. Demetrius, the soldier, was to be her betrothed. True, Demetrius could not sing songs and never wrote poems to Hermia, but he knew how to wield a sword, and father Egeus admired that more than the most beautiful songs in the world.

But alas! While Hermia leans from the window and whispers to Lysander, stern father Egeus is drawing nigh. He is moving as quietly as a mouse and he will catch the unlucky Hermia and Lysander unawares.

But we will leave the unlucky couple for a while. Let us take a look at the Athenian palace. What a bustle and a to do there is there! There is cooking and baking, cleaning and polishing, and fresh flowers to be set in fine vases; singers are rehearsing some ceremonial songs, but what is the meaning of all this? No one has a moment to explain; everyone is in a hurry, carrying things, arranging them, hanging curtains, dusting furniture. Ho there, Master Philostrate! You are in charge of things at the palace; please tell us, what is happening? 'Our noble Theseus, the Athenian lord,' Master Philostrate replies, 'is making preparations for his marriage to Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons.'

And into the midst of all this hurry and bustle comes stern father Egeus, leading his unfortunate daughter, Hermia. He is on his way to noble Theseus to complain about his disobedient daughter's behaviour. Has he not promised her to the brave Demetrius? And did he not just a moment ago catch her amusing herself with Lysander? It is not right for a daughter to be disobedient. It is against the law of Athens.

'Philostrate, go proclaim my words! Either Hermia shall obey her father, or she must promise never for the rest of her life to wed. If she will promise neither, she must be put to death! That is the law of Athens,' declares Theseus.

Now Theseus, the Athenian ruler, and Hermia's father, Egeus, each have their own troubles.

So has Master Quince, the carpenter, for he has invited his friends, some Athenian craftsmen, to rehearse a play about Pyramus and Thisbe. They want to rehearse it in secret and present it to Demetrius and his bride and to the entire court on the occasion of the royal wedding. 'What a suprise that will be, friends,' says Quince, 'so quietly now. First of all we must sort out the cast. Nick Bottom, the weaver, you will play the leading part, that of the hero, Pyramus; Snug, the joiner, will play the lion; Flute, the bellows-mender, can be Pyramus's beloved, Thisbe—but beware of your voice, Flute, for Thisbe is a maiden with a voice like a dove. Robin Starveling, the tailor, can play the moon. It's a very easy part. He only needs to hold up a lantern and let it shine. And we will plaster Snout, the tinker, with lime and he will represent a wall on the stage. There, I think that is settled.'

'But would it not be better if we went into the forest to rehearse the play?' asks Master Quince, the carpenter. 'Here some one might hear us and that would be an end to the surprise. What do the rest of you think?'

The others agree with Master Quince. All the actors nod their heads in agreement. Master Snug seizes the lion's head, Master Starveling raises the lantern, for it is now evening, and they all set off for the forest. They think that there they will be alone. But they are not, not even in the quiet of the dark forest trees.

Lysander is forcing his way through the dense undergrowth, leading his beloved Hermia by the hand. They are fleeing from her father Egeus, for beyond the forest lies another country, where the laws of Athens do not hold sway. There, Lysander hopes to marry Hermia. They would have passed through the forest long ago, if only they had not lost their way. Wearily they sit down on the moss to rest, and fall asleep.

Now Demetrius, fair Hermia's other admirer, has also made his way into the woods. He has heard that Hermia has fled her father's house and he is following her. And not far behind again runs fair-haired Helena. Helena is in love with Demetrius, but he cannot be bothered with her.

And so to-night the silent forest will be a lively spot. If Master Quince the carpenter had only known how many people were to be in the woodland glades, he would surely have decided to go and rehearse elsewhere.

There are, even now, so many mortals coming and going in the forest, that it will be even worse when the actors start rehearsing their play. What will Oberon, King of the Fairies, say to all this? He loves calm and order in his woodland and realm, above all now, when he is feeling sulky and in a bad mood. Titania, the Queen of the Fairies, will not listen to him. Time and time again he has visited her and always she refuses to let him declare his love for her. Whether he comes in the guise of Spring or Summer, or even as Autumn with the rich scent of fruits, always it is the same.

Oberon wanders through the forest and longs for Titania. Even the leaves on the trees quiver with his longing. And Titania? Carefree she plays with her fairies and elves and wherever she goes all things seem to glow with life. Every blossom, every twig begins to tremble, fir cones and acorns start a-dancing and sprites rise out of the moss and sing with tiny silver voices.

In vain Oberon offers Titania the sweetest and most lovely presents. She streches out her hands towards them, but she does not touch them.

'Come hither, Puck!' Angrily Oberon calls for his servant.

The forest stirs as with a faint breeze and in a twinkling Puck stands before his master.

'Listen well, Puck, to what I tell you,' Oberon commands. 'On an island far from here grows a tiny red flower full of magic juice. One only needs to bathe the eye-lids of one who sleeps with this juice and it will mightily bewitch him. Whether he will or no, the person must dote on the first living being he sets eyes on when he wakes. I intend to punish proud Titania. Be off with you! Make what speed you can, and bring me here this magic flower!'

'Fly, good Puck, like an arrow loosed at a stag and be here again with the flower ere the echo repeats my words.'

Oberon's faithful servant rises up and flies off, faster than a winged arrow, to the island where the tiny red flower sparkles and shines. Scarcely has the echo of Oberon's words resounded on the rocks than Puck is back, handing his king the magic flower.

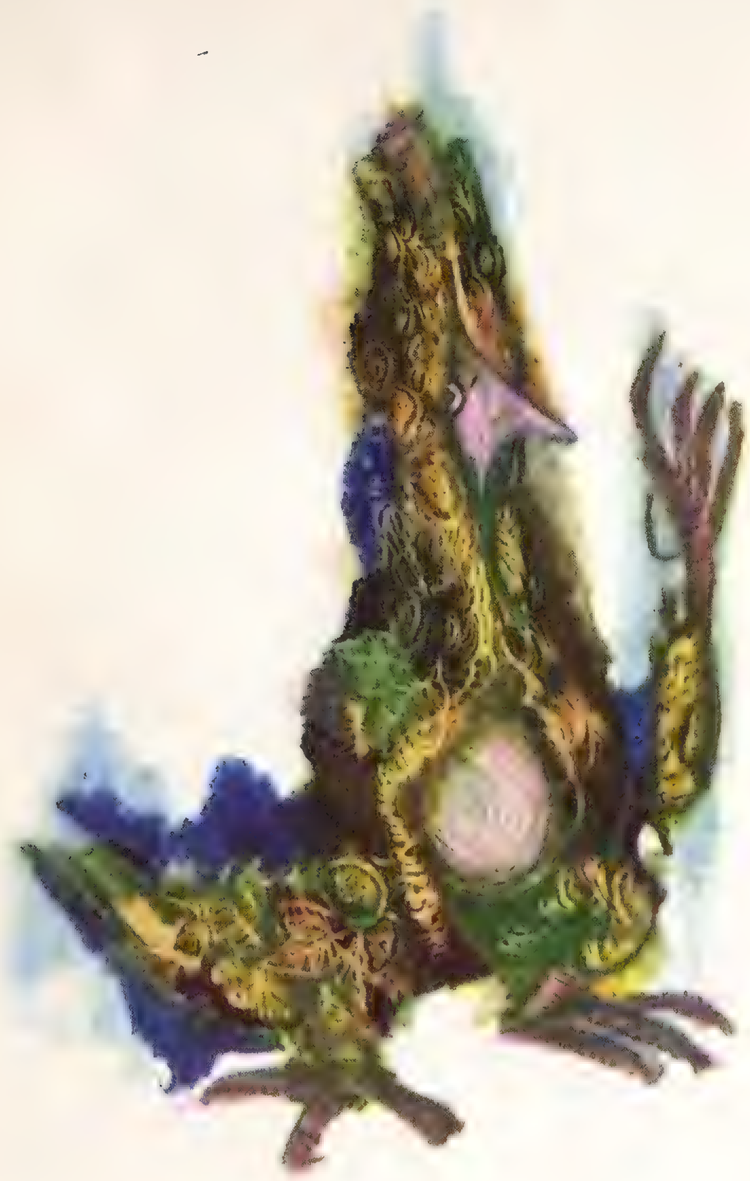
Meanwhile, deep in the forest, lovely Titania rests on a fine net of cobwebs in a bower of sweet-scented blossoms. Tiny elves cradle her and sing her softly to sleep.

All at once Oberon appears above Titania. His breath scatters the tiny elves, but Titania sleeps on without stirring. Oberon bends over her and bathes her eye-lids with the magic juice of the little red flower.

The spell is cast. Now, fair Titania, when you wake, you will dote on whomsoever chance brings your way, be it even bear or fox.

'Ho, there, Puck!' Oberon calls to his servant again. 'Now let us deal with the mortals who are so disturbing us here in the forest. Find first the soldier, Demetrius. Wait till he settles down to sleep and then anoint his eyelids with the magic juice. The moment he wakes bring Helena to meet him, for she has lost her way in the dark, poor lass. She loves Demetrius, worries and frets for him, but he will have none of her. We can soon put this matter to rights with our magic blossom. And as for those craftsmen who keep shouting of Pyramus and Thisbe — you can deal with them yourself. Frighten them, tease them and scatter them in all directions.'

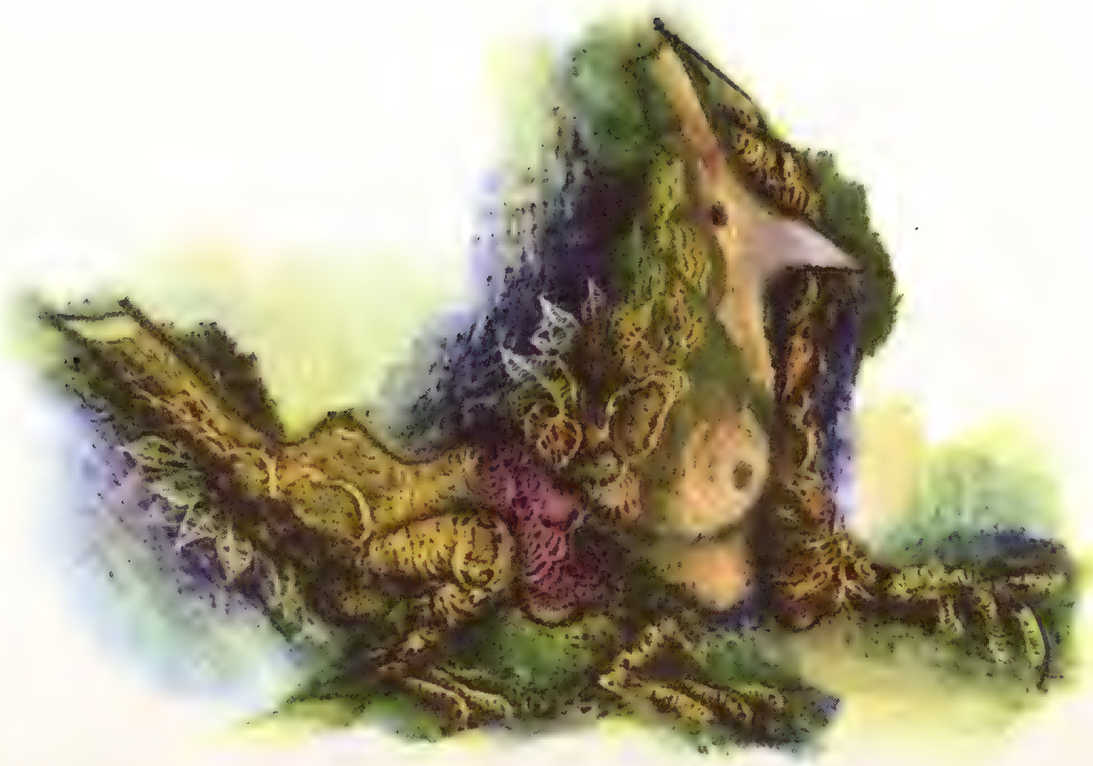
And here indeed are the craftsmen! What gusto they put into their acting! Master Snug might be a real lion, such a roar he gives. Carry on with your acting while you can, good fellows, for in a moment Puck, that sprite of the woodlands, will be up to his tricks with you.



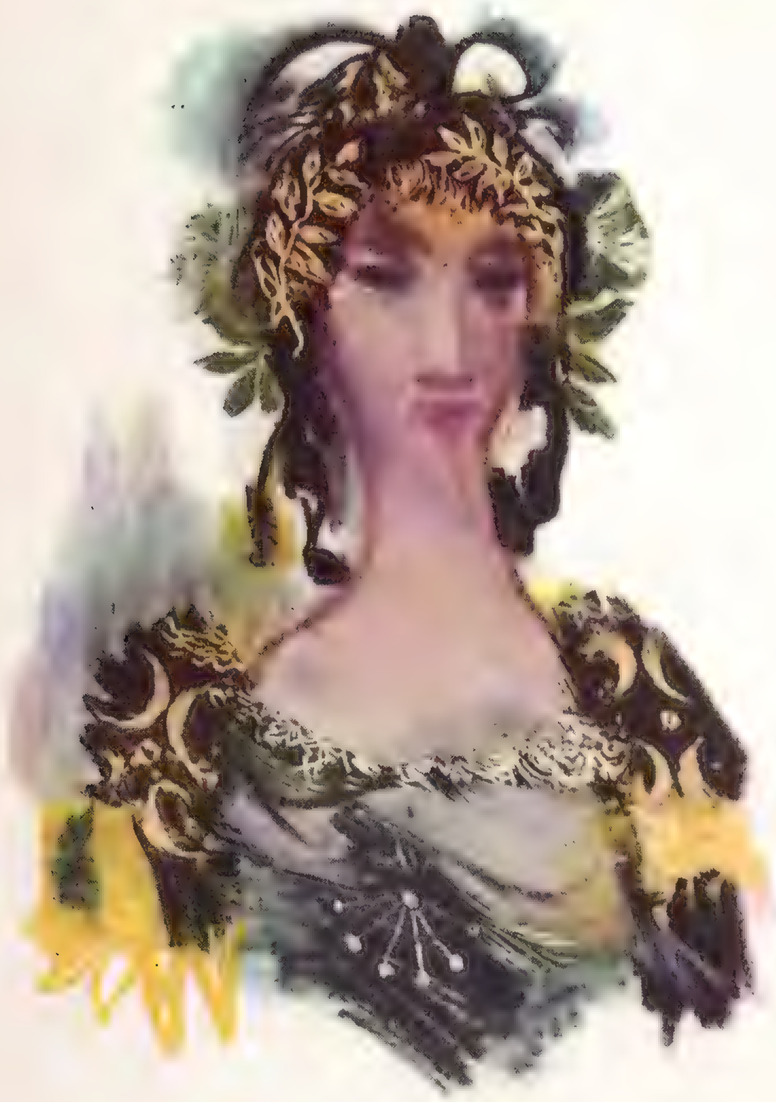
Puck's mischief has begun. His magic never fails. You, who were Bottom the weaver once, are now a long-eared beast, a monster with an ass's head, yet still speaking as a mortal does.

'Save our souls!' the others cry, and the moon, the lion, Thisbe, and even Quince the carpenter flee from the long-eared one. Enchanted leaves whirl up around their flying legs, tree roots entangle them like snakes as Puck chases the terrified actors on and on, growling now like a bear, now grunting, barking, in a succession of fearsome sounds. Bottom the weaver is the only one who does not realise what is happening. He stands rooted to the spot, unable to understand why all the others run away from him.

The noise wakes Titania from her sleep. She opens her eyes and catches sight of Bottom with his ass's head. At once the little magic flower begins to work its wonders . . .



'Oh, how beautiful you are,' proclaims Titania with delight. 'Stay here and do not leave me. All my elves and fairies will serve you, and I too, for you are my lord, my love.'



While fair Titania gently strokes the long ass's ears and admires the ass's song of Bottom the weaver, Puck hastens to carry out his other task.

But, unhappy Puck, what has he done? Instead of Demetrius' eyes, he has by mischance bathed Lysander's eyes with the magic juice. What a muddle he has made, for the first person that Lysander sees is Helena. Instantly he forgets his Hermia. Helena is everything to him. It is a tangle that will need a deal of sorting out.

Angrily Oberon reaches for the flower and swiftly bathes Demetrius' eyes, but will the magic juice still do its work?

It does, for Demetrius also sees the fair Helena.

'My beloved', he cries, kneeling before his new love. 'Helena, my sweetest one! Never will I leave you ere I die!' So, Puck, that would seem to be all right. These two clearly belong to one another.

But no! The problem is in no way solved. Just as, formerly, Demetrius and Lysander quarrelled for the right to marry Hermia, so now they are both in love with Helena.

Hermia has been deserted. What will she do without Lysander? She has run away from her father for Lysander's sake and now he has left her helpless in the dark forest. He has eyes only for Helena.

And Helena cannot understand. One moment Demetrius spurned her love—but now . . . Suddenly she has two admirers, and one of them is Demetrius!

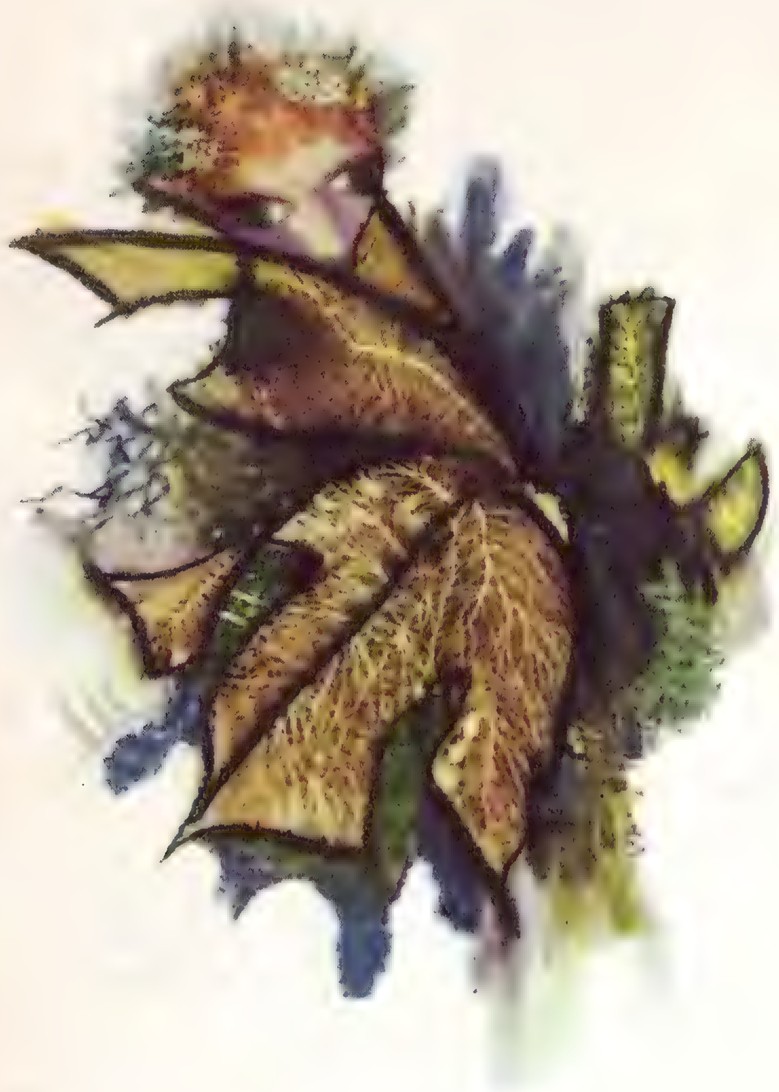
What a lot that tiny red flower has to answer for!

First Lysander, then Demetrius tries to win Helena's love. In vain Hermia weeps and wrings her hands. Not even Helena can do anything to help her out of this entanglement.

Only Puck, with another magic flower now in his hand, can make amends for the harm already done. As soon as they all lie down to sleep, exhausted by their quarrels, Puck will bathe Lysander's eyes again with a new magic nectar. This time the first person he sees when he awakes is Hermia. He smiles at her and falls asleep again.

The night is slowly giving way to dawn. The dark shadows disappear and the magic of the night-time forest once more sleeps with the coming of day. Birds are stirring in the trees. Even Oberon has forgiven Titania and released her from enchantment. Puck has whisked away Nick Bottom's ass's head and Bottom lies sleeping.

Lysander and Demetrius are reconciled. They, who almost fought a duel during the hours of darkness, now remember nothing of their rivalry. Their heads are full of happier dreams.



In the early morning air the blare of hunting horns and bay of hounds resound through the forest. Master Quince's actors rub their eyes and crawl out from under the branches of the old trees where they have hidden themselves to escape from Puck's mischief-making pranks. They stand aside as the galloping horses go by. Theseus, the Athenian ruler, is out hunting with his future bride, Hippolyta.

But what a trophy they find instead of the stag they sought. There on a mossy bank lie Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena, sound asleep as though it were the middle of the night. So much for the plans of old father Egeus! But what can he do? Demetrius has himself chosen fair Helena.

'Wake them up!' calls Theseus. 'They shall come along with us to the palace. I cannot part those who once have chosen one another.'

What feasting there is in Athens! Three weddings are celebrated at one and the same time. Theseus makes Hippolyta his wife, Demetrius takes Helena and Lysander, Hermia. There is wine and feasting and so much good food that not only the guests but all the singers, musicians, actors and dancers have more than their fill. So many entertainers come from far and wide that Philostrate, Theseus' Master of the Revels, is at a loss to know whom to call on next.

'And now,' announces Philostrate, making up his mind, 'the next item on the programme is a play about Pyramus and Thisbe. It has been prepared for you by a company of Athenian craftsmen. It is not, I must say, very polished, and I am not at all sure that it is suitable for such distinguished ears.'

'Lead them on,' commands Theseus, 'Even if the play is not perfect, the players will act sincerely and with all their hearts. We cannot let their efforts come to nothing.'

Master Quince and his fellow actors bow to the assembled company. 'This man, here,' Quince explains, 'is meant to represent a wall and his hand, curled up like a funnel, is a chink in the wall.'

On one side of the wall Nick Bottom—as Pyramus—presses close to the opening and, on the other side is Flute, the bellows-mender, acting Pyramus's lady-love, Thisbe. They arrange to meet beyond the town, but Thisbe, arriving first, is attacked by a lion.

Never fear, however, for it is only Snug the joiner in a lion's skin. Thisbe escapes but leaves her cloak caught on the lion's claws. Unhappy Pyramus approaches, picks up the torn cloak and starts bewailing his poor Thisbe. Surely the lion has devoured her.

Rather than live without her, Pyramus stabs himself with a sword and Thisbe returns to find her lover dead. She cries out and, in desperation, stabs herself too, while calmly as this tragic tale unfolds Master Tailor lights up the stage as Moonshine.

Most unlikely of tales! One torn cloak responsible for the death of two good people. But the lion roared wondrously well. Good for him! Even Theseus praises him.

The play is over, and our story, too. From the confusion and entangled spells emerges, like the sweet kernel in a nut, at last a happy end.

But what is Puck doing here still? Let him tidy up the last mischief of that midsummer night; let him clear away the dream of fairies, elves, hobgoblins, sprites and mortals. When day is done, new dreams will light upon the lids of sleepers and again the little red flower that teaches love will blossom in the stillness of the night. So be careful how you rub your eyes, for they may bear the nectar of sweet dreams.

But just try to sweep the dear old dreams away, Puck! You may be a wizard with enchantment, but you cannot magic dreams away from mortals' heads. There they fly like gay-coloured birds, and will not be banished, even by the likes of you.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

The photographs (made by Jiří Vojta) show

scenes from Jiří Trnka's puppet-film version of

Shakespeare's play.

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